

Artifacts from the Anthropocene

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art and Public Life
in the Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University

May 2018

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By

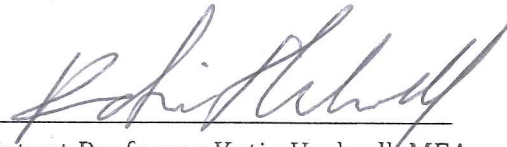
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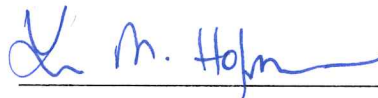
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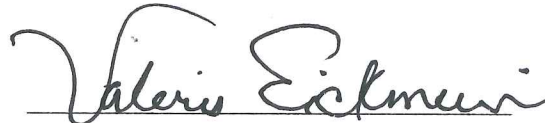
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6-25-18

Date

ABSTRACT

“The collection of phenomena must precede the analysis of them, and every new fact, illustrative of the action and reaction between humanity and the material world around it, is another step toward the determination of the great question, whether man is of nature or above her.”

-George Perkins Marsh, *Man and Nature*

My current body of work captures and displays a humanly manipulated geological history. I use and rework the discarded to build records of time, memory, and progress seen from the perspective of an uncertain future. By combining organic and synthetic materials I create moments fabricated in a modern dystopia. We enter the Anthropocene, the age of humans. Earth is ever-changing and, for the first time, one species is capable of leaving a worldwide impact. How will we determine when human intervention in the natural world is for the better or the worse? Can we survive if we continue to view ourselves as above nature?

During my time at Herron School of Art and Design I developed a body of work I am quite proud of with support from my committee, faculty, peers, and family. I began experimenting with new processes and materials. I used my background in museum exhibition design to influence the presentation of my work. My thesis body of work captures and displays a humanly manipulated geological history. I use and rework the discarded to build records of time, memory, and progress seen from the perspective of an uncertain future. By combining organic and synthetic materials I create moments fabricated in a modern dystopia.

To illustrate this concept I have divided my documentation into three sections. In the first section titled The Anthropocene, I discuss the basis for the individual pieces in my work. This includes an introduction to the new geological epoch; the Anthropocene, why this scientific development is important to understand and recognize, and how artists are creating work to shed light on this subject. The second section titled The Work goes into detail about the conceptual process for the individual works displayed in my thesis show: wood and resin pieces, concrete castings, and the display cases. From there, I transition into the third and final section, The Art of Display. In this section I discuss the presentation choices I made from research on museum theory and the origins of natural history museums.

THE ANTHROPOCENE

My thesis body of work is a response to new discussions that are happening in geology and the rest of the natural sciences. That discussion is centered around whether or not

we have entered a new epoch - a geological age that is in existence solely because of the effect humans have had on the earth and its climate. Scientists are calling this new geological age the Anthropocene (Monastersky).

Scientists argue that the Anthropocene began around the onset of the industrial revolution. This is the time when humans started making dramatic impacts on the earth that have continued to present day. We are forever changing the earth's geological structure. These mutations have been produced by colonialism, river damming, human caused extinction, and much more. Some deny that these changes are negative for our environment (Monastersky). However, I strongly believe, along with many others, that if we do not modify our actions now then we will cause irreversible damage to the earth.

The idea that humans are impacting the world in a negative way is nothing new. George Perkins Marsh, an early environmentalist, wrote a book in 1864 titled *Man and Nature* about the negative impacts he foresaw humans having on nature. However, to declare a new epoch helps to draw attention to just how big that impact is. The Anthropocene is an emerging issue building on past themes about the environment. It has become more specific, has a focus, and finally has a name.

Many artists use their art to demonstrate the problems humans have inflicted on the earth. One of the artists whose work shaped a political stance on environmental issues is Mark Dion. He built countless installations pointing the finger at a myriad of harmful practices that have become very common. Many of these issues directly correspond with scientists' theories on the foundation of the Anthropocene. From an interview with Mark Dion, "One of the fundamental problems is that even if scientists are

good at what they do, they're not necessarily adept in the field of representation. They don't have access to the rich set of tools, like irony, allegory and humor, which are the meat and potatoes of art and literature."(11). His work aims to call out those who sugar coat reality and that these cute fluffy fixes are flimsy and barely touch on what needs to be done (Dion 11). An example of this in Mark Dion's work is a piece titled *Wheelbarrows of Progress*. For this piece he worked with William Schefferine to display a row of wheelbarrows, each containing their own commentary on important issues. Some of those issues included rainforest preservation, animal extinction, and acid precipitation. They are executed humorously by means of using stuffed animals (Dion 16).

Humor is also used to propose ideas of what could be if humans changed their behavior or way of living for the better. Artist and art historian, Arne Hendricks, creates narratives of helpful outcomes instead of painting a bleak and uncertain future. Using a wide variety of mediums, Hendricks demonstrates how many issues caused by overpopulation could be solved if humans were only 50 centimeters tall in his work titled *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. Through diagrams and illustrations Hendricks shows the viewer how much smaller our environmental impact would be (Myers 36).

What is natural? Can we currently identify an authentic natural object? This idea is already becoming blurred due to human intervention. This blurring of natural and synthetic has been going on for decades in the form of selective breeding, genetic engineering and modification. There are many instances the average person is unaware of or doesn't think about. One example given by William Myers is from the 1950s when scientists would expose plant seeds to radiation in an attempt to produce interesting or

useful mutations (22). The peppermint plant is one that stems from these experiments. The artist-led collective, The Center for Genomic Gastronomy, created a piece titled *Mutagenic Mist* in 2012 where they showed video footage of these radiation experiments while releasing a peppermint scented fog into the space, creating a slightly disturbing atmosphere that is well tied to the subject matter (Myers 22).

Another artist who is calling attention to this subject is Richard Pell who created the Center for PostNatural History. In this exhibition Pell displays preserved specimens with museum like quality that illustrate the way humans have already distorted nature. These artifacts of human design, as Pell refers to them, include cancerous cells, a domesticated dog skull, and genetically modified mosquitoes, goats, mice, and zebrafish. His work with the Center is meant to show the viewer how these objects represent our societal priorities, and are not truly a commentary on whether or not these practices are damaging (Myers 42).

THE WORK

My work is inspired by the concept of the Anthropocene. I convey this by making work that combines synthetic and organic materials, and in their combining, represent a bleak future. This work takes the form of furniture, sculpture and manufactured artifacts cataloged and organized in a museum-like setting. My thesis exhibition titled *Artifacts from the Anthropocene* provides a suggestive commentary on society's relationship with the earth, the constant damaging of it, fixing it, and manipulating it to do what we desire, as we pick and choose the evidence that best fits our side of the story. This show explores

this theme by setting up a mock natural history display that is set in the not-so-distant future.

For the execution of this theme, I created an intimate space within the Berkshire, Reese and Paul Galleries. Four different scales of art ranging from large to very small are presented to help draw the viewer in and around the space. The show consists of wood and resin pieces, concrete sculptures, and small specimen-like display cases (see fig. 1). The variation in work and attention to the smallest detail are key to the narrative.

My work shows how humankind has so aggressively taken over the planet that the resulting evidence can be seen in everything that used to be considered a natural object, often blurring the line between what is nature and what is manmade. Future curators of natural history museums won't be able to parse between the two, forcing them to display it as one homogenous group. My work tells the story of attempted preservation; the struggle between industry, growth, and preservation; and lastly, admiration of nature mixed with a complacent attitude for the injustices performed against her (Kastner 17).

When patrons first walk into the gallery they are met by mysterious layered forms, eight wood and resin cross-sections that evoke geological formations and landscapes. These earthly figures are presented on mounts and stands that are subtle enough not to detract. They are organized in two rows of four on raised platforms in the center of the space. There is room to walk all the way around the platform so that the viewer can experience the tables from every angle (see fig. 2).

Displayed directly behind the table forms is a large wood and resin panel. The piece has been carefully mounted to the wall with custom metal brackets that place it at

just the right angle for optimum viewing. The top edge is sharply cut off while the bottom has its curvy irregular edge left intact. The whole piece glows from behind, illuminating the murky green that spreads throughout (see fig. 3).

I utilize wood with imperfections such as large knots or holes, irregular edges, and damage from bug infestations. Most of these pieces I collected from the trash or burn bin; they were deemed by others as unusable or undesirable. The wood in my work represents nature and the ruin we have caused. It is still beautiful, but damaged. The use of small flawed pieces of wood suggest a scarcity of natural materials and a need to fill their void (see fig. 4 - 9).

The resin acts as a repair to this void. It strengthens the wood, fills in all the holes, seams the pieces together, and makes it whole again. In some of the pieces the resin takes on a natural look by way of mimicking familiar color variations. Others are blatantly synthetic and engulf the fractured wood remains. It is slightly gruesome leaching into the natural wood; changing its appearance and makeup forever. The resin is my interpretation of the extensive harm humans have done to the earth. It epitomizes our inadequate fixes to these compounding problems.

On the right side of the space are a series of crystalline concrete sculptures (see fig. 10). The five pieces, ranging in size, are propped several inches off the wall by white mounts. The face of the concrete is curvy and organic, but the sides have been chopped clean to create perfect rectangular sections. They act as core samples that have been excavated from the earth.

The forms for the concrete castings derive from crystals that I grew. I began growing crystals on concrete and wood to continue my conceptual development of manipulating nature. I then photographed the crystal forms and used them to digitally generate the representational depth fields for the concrete molds (see fig. 11-13). The molds were milled using the CNC, computer controlled router. I thought it would be an interesting choice to use technology and digital fabrication to recreate an abstracted version of the crystals.

I chose concrete as my medium because it is a common construction and building material. Concrete has become so deeply integrated into our urban surroundings that I imagine in the future it melding seamlessly in the layers of our geological history. To emphasize this melding of human construction and the natural world I layered back in the copper sulfate crystals I grew while casting the pieces. Some of them I mixed the crystals into the concrete, changing its chemistry and structural integrity, while others I used as inclusions to create geode-like bursts. These inclusions help to mimic the original formations from which they derive.

Rounding out the space on the opposite side of the concrete sculptures sit three display cases. The content in these cases act as a clue to the viewer, letting them see that the foreign materials in the exhibition have manifested in other forms. The fragments provide evidence of a greater undisplayed collection. The case closest to the front contains three large blue green shimmering objects that look like they used to be one (see fig. 14). In front of them are six much smaller pieces that look to be comprised of similar elements. The label in the case simply reads $\text{CuSO}_4 \cdot 5\text{H}_2\text{O}$ referring to the fact they all

contain copper sulfate crystals and that is the commonality they are grouped by. In the next case a connection between the pieces can still be made, but perhaps not as evident (see fig. 15). Each piece contains or relates to Borax crystals. The label reads KA1(SO4)2 . The last case also only has one label in it, yet the pieces are a bit harder to connect to one another (see fig. 16). Their label reads C2.C14.AGE.

The labeling methodology is an important detail of the museum facade. Each wood and resin piece is carefully labeled with the year it was made, resin quantity, how many types of wood, and what type of object it is. Or the chemical names are listed out for the crystal objects (see fig. 17). I wanted the labels and the names of the pieces to be a bit cryptic. I did not want a name that would conjure cozy familiarity. I wanted them to feel like they are a part of the “establishment.” The labels are modeled after ones you would see in a science or history museum, but perhaps not as informative. They more closely represent what you would find behind the scenes in the dark cavernous rooms of museum collections - a way for the curator to identify and catalogue pieces using insider language.

THE ART OF DISPLAY

I have come across the word authentic in several areas of my research - museums giving objects authenticity - untouched natural objects are considered authentic when compared to genetically modified species (Latham 84). Does authenticity equal value? Is authenticity an opinion of fact? Or is the concept of authenticity fluid? To answer some of

these questions in my research, I went back to some of the earliest forms of natural history museums.

Humans have been collecting earthly objects and putting them on display since the seventeenth century. Some of the first curated displays of these collections were called Wunderkammern or Curiosity Cabinets. These displays were typically found in the estates of wealthy well-traveled men looking to show off their procurements (Yanni 17) . Curiosity Cabinets were a reaction to an “influx” of new specimens due to global travel (Chicone 16). They were described as, “encyclopedia collections of all kinds of objects of dissimilar origin and diverse materials on a universal scale” (qtd. in Chicone 16). It was an attempt at ordering an overwhelming amount of new discoveries.

However, due to the fact that these were largely private collections, specimens had confusingly long names that made it difficult for scientists to keep track of what was what. This resulted in numerous cases of a single specimen receiving multiple names (Chicone 17). Even false specimens would end up in the mix, like “two-headed kittens” and “unicorn horns” (Chicone 16). Some claim that the development of the binomial nomenclature naming system of Carl Linnaeus was what gave way to the modern natural history museum (Chicone 17). As Hagan claimed, “The clear and logical mind of Linnaeus not only purified the system, but also enabled him to purge the collections of a considerable number of fabulous and fictitious objects...” (qtd. in Chicone 19). This transitioned natural history collections from the private to the public realm, evolving into institutions of important scientific research and knowledge. “Objects during the late Victorian age were seen as, ‘the sites of meaning and knowledge,’ and, given that

museums were the repositories of such objects, ‘many intellectuals regarded museums as a primary place where new knowledge about the world could be created and given order.’” (qtd. in Chicone 20). Due to this change in how museums were viewed, many universities began using them as places of study and scientific research (Chicone 20).

The idea that museums present truth is such a strong concept that even non evidence-based museums have emerged. These institutions mimic the language of other museums to help affirm their faith-based ideals. One such institution is The Museum of Creation and Earth History in San Diego, California. Here, they even go as far as presenting real artifacts, but choose to give them a narrative that fits their ideals. Things like Neanderthal skulls are no longer a clue to evolution, but are explained away as being the people in the bible that are just really old. The designers of this museum have avoided using religious imagery in the architecture and instead created a very institutional feel (Yanni 162-164).

To convey this idea of authority is essential. Similar to the Creation Museum and some of the artists I mentioned in the first section, I used the viewer’s perception of museums to authenticate my false objects. This vision is detailed in almost every aspect of the exhibit.

- The space and the pieces within it are well lit and laid out systematically.
- The space has a pristine and intentional look. I pre-planned several space layouts before choosing the final one. I also had the display case layouts planned ahead of the exhibit install.

- I chose a serif font for the exhibit title and labels because of its authoritative quality.
- The labels were made out of clear acrylic which I laser engraved and hand painted. This gave the labels a permanence that could not be achieved via the gallery sticker labels.
- All of the risers and display cases were custom made for the specific objects that would be going on/in them.
- I painted the risers that the end tables rested on a dark grey instead of art gallery white. This was done so the table stands would fall away leaving the tops to be highlighted.
- I displayed broken pieces together. Some of them made whole again with the use of metal fixtures. This was done to imply age and an attempt to repiece history.
- The display cases had thick acrylic tops which gave the sense of very precious contents.

Even with all of the above listed clues, the underlying theme of the exhibit is inevitably determined by the viewer. With limited information provided on what these forms truly represent, the audience is left with what they perceive it to be. This is unlike modern museums that provide a barrage of label content, which can be too much for some to take in. Some observational questions could include:

- How do these objects relate to each other?
- Why are they grouped yet all shown together?
- What do the different groups mean or represent?

- What do the labels and title mean?

Our relationship with the Earth is a complicated one that will continue to evolve and change. It has created fractures in our society. Dividing those who want to be proactive and develop preventative strategies from those who passively wait for problems to surface and haphazardly patch them. I hope that my thesis exhibition is a glimpse into a future that will never be.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

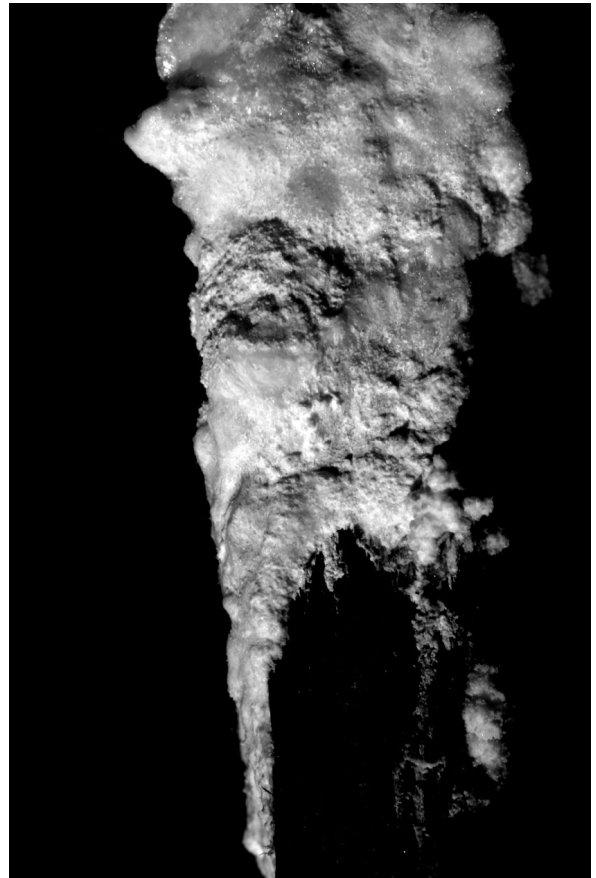


Figure 12

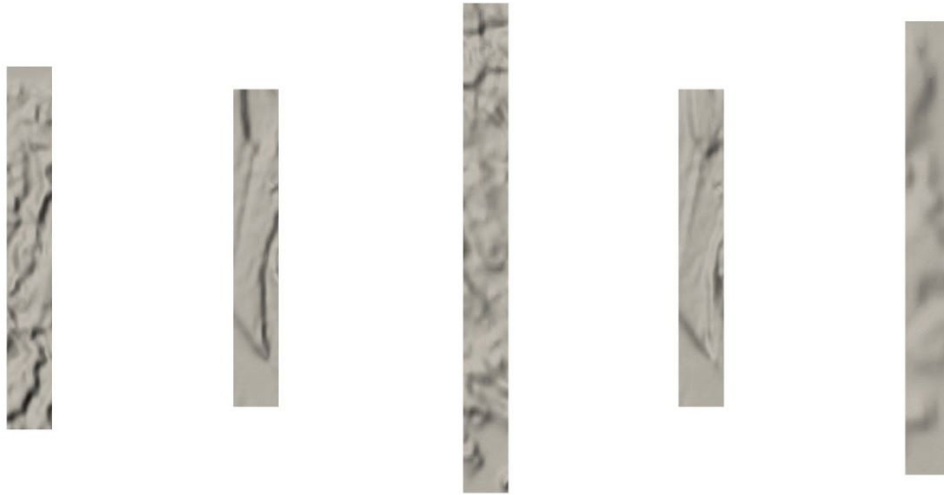


Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17

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